

The Nicaraguan Revolution and Transition to Democracy

How the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional Moved Nicaragua from
Somoza to Democracy

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From 1937 to 1979, the country of Nicaragua was effectively ruled by one family, the Somoza family, approximating a hereditary dictatorship. Although members of the family ruled under the title of “President,” the regime was a far cry from any semblance of a democracy. In his article “Sandinista Nicaragua as a Deweyan Social Experiment,” Joseph Betz emphatically characterizes the Somoza family as “cruel and greedy autocrats” (Betz 25). As unrest with systematic oppression grew, so did the strength of the primary opposition campaign, fronted by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), a leftist party founded on socialist theories. In July 1979, the Junta of National Reconstruction, a five-member committee of FSLN leaders officially became the ruling power of Nicaragua by removing Somoza from office. In the Presidential election of November 1984, called “the cleanest held in Nicaragua since 1928” by the U.S. Latin American Studies Association, the Junta ceded power without protest to President-elect Daniel Ortega (Betz 26).

In *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, the authors note that Nicaragua’s successful “installation and consolidation of democracy,” transitioning from an autocratic regime to a political democracy, is unique in that it was the result of a bloody “‘overthrow of power’ by implacable antagonists,” a typically impossible scenario (O’Donnell and Schmitter 11). Because Nicaragua’s democratization process manifested in a unique manner wholly distinct from the paradigm of democratization embodied in countries like the United States, detractors conclude that it cannot fit the archetype of what a democracy *intrinsically is* and thus classify the Nicaraguan Revolution as an installation of a competitive authoritarian regime. In “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism”, the authors argue that FSLN’s loss of power to the opposition party, the Constitutionalist Liberation Party (PLC), in 1990 marks Nicaragua’s transitional moment from a competitive authoritarian regime to democratization (Levitsky and Way 59-60). Thomas Carothers’s article “The End of the Transition Paradigm” decries Nicaragua as a “grey area;” their democratic aims are tarnished by what he defines as “feckless pluralism,” a condition wherein corrupt elites within each party have complete dominion over the trajectory of the country such that the public has little influence in social and political affairs aside from their ability to elect members of the corrupt, partisan elite to positions of power (Carothers 7). But, Carothers’s “feckless pluralism” could apply to many countries universally deemed “democratic,” like the US, such that it cannot appropriately be framed as an indication of a “grey” democracy.

The reality of an entirely peaceful shift in power from FSLN to PLC compels the notion that Nicaraguan democratization began with the overthrow of the Somoza dynasty, not FSLN’s loss in the 1990 election – the FSLN only resorted to violent insurrection because it was the only viable recourse for the public in pursuit of gaining political voice due to Somoza’s systematic dereliction of legal alternatives to regime change and stifling of free speech (Serra 24). The 1984 election was conducted in a free and fair manner with a significant percentage of the

electorate participating, the 1987 constitution drafted by elected officials in the Legislative branch of the government “combined Western liberal democratic norms with a revolutionary social conscience” (Prevost 309), and opposition parties were able to gain power through electoral means; therefore, the democratization of Nicaragua should be denoted as initiating with the removal of the Somoza dictatorship in 1979 and ending with the implementation of the Nicaraguan Constitution in 1987. It may be argued that the Junta of National Reconstruction was a non-democratic entity during the transition period before the first election (1979-1984): it gained power without popular elections yet still passed legislation, fitting the “pact” construct of an undemocratic institution that facilitates the movement of a polity toward democracy after removal of a dictator (O'Donnell and Schmitter 38).

Concurrently, the Nicaraguan Revolution was successful because FSLN and the Junta of National Reconstruction, although not democratically elected to power, had the support of the critical mass of Nicaragua's citizenry. As delineated by Rustow Dankwart in *Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model*, unity of the citizenry is the preeminent background condition for democratization (Rustow 351). Citizenry, he opines, is unified by two concrete factors: existence of struggle and unification of national ideology (Rustow 355). Though Dankwart referred to struggle as between socioeconomic classes, the Nicaraguan Revolution was less concerned with class struggle and more with struggle against authoritarianism. Yet, capitalist structures in Nicaragua contributed to “la polarización capitalista de las clases... donde el proletariado y la burguesía aun en proceso de diferenciación respect de estos agentes de desarrollo social” or the polarization and differentiation between the bourgeois and proletariat classes in the realm of social strata development (Vilas 126). Rampant nepotism and favoritism defined the Somoza regime and eventually alienated many in the private sector (Gorman 149), cultivating a unanimous hatred for Somoza that allowed FSLN to “build bridges” between the bourgeoisie and proletariat and fashion a cohesive opposition front despite pervading class antagonisms (Cuzán 78). The culmination of class unification against a common enemy was the diversity of the background of insurrection participants: about 29% were students, 22% craftsmen, 16% journalists, 16% clerical workers, 7% professors and degree holders, 5% traders, 4.5% farmers, and .5% other (Vilas 131).

The eccentric composition of members of the insurrection was also the result of two major events that made Somoza “algo así como el ‘enemigo ideal’... profundamente corrupto y crecientemente represivo” (Vilas 139) or the perfect enemy and embodiment of oppressive regime and corruption: the assassination of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, a popular and vocal opponent of the Somoza regime, and the response to the 1972 earthquake wherein Somoza abused foreign aid by employing his own companies to aid the rebuilding effort and purchasing large expanses of damaged land for under-market value for his own personal fiduciary gain (Cuzán 80). Whereas FSLN was founded

in the early 1960s, these two events allowed the party to win the favor of the people and buoyed a mass movement motivated by extreme discontent. The blight of the Somoza family fostered “a crisis of legitimacy” for the dynasty, leading to a “crisis of change” as is delineated by Lipset (Lipset 87).

Faction groups rallied under the FSLN banner because FSLN’s assisted the groups on a grassroots level such that both FSLN and the organizations could better achieve their goals; thus, small grassroots groups were able to effectively influence the trajectory of FSLN ideology and, by proxy, their future actions. FSLN repaid these groups by creating laws; for example, a law that guaranteed the right to strike and collective bargain, causing unionization to skyrocket from 10% of the workforce under Somoza in 1979 to over 55% by the end of the 1980s (Prevost 308). Education-oriented groups were elated by the promise and eventual actualization of a reversal of the low illiteracy and adult education rates under Somoza; under the FSLN, adult education rose from 0 in 1978 to 194,800 persons in 1984 and literacy from 50% to 87% of the population (Betz 34). In exchange for female supporters, FSLN initiated various services that, by 1994, reached at least 108,000 women by 1994, and toiled to facilitate movement toward gender equality previously stagnated by the staunch Catholic Agenda of Somoza (Prevost 318-319). FSLN’s “highly disruptive...operations” prior to the overthrow of Somoza were publicized in the media, instilling revolutionary spirit even in those disconnected from grassroots movements and bringing them fully into the FSLN fold.

If “one year of economic crisis is enough to produce the political effects” of destabilizing a regime (Limongi and Przeworski 169), then it is surprising that the overthrow of the Somoza dynasty did not occur sooner. In an agrarian economy like Nicaragua’s, misdistribution of land has particularly dire consequences since land allocation essentially defines the distribution of wealth for a majority of the population. Ergo, the discontent regarding the extreme and growing gap between the relatively few wealthy and poor was intensified by the Somoza family and its associates owning “20% of the agricultural land and 33% of the non-agricultural businesses” (Betz 34) and, ergo, holding a large portion of the key to wealth and social mobility. Legitimacy was bestowed on FSLN as a result of its creation of institutions “proper...for the society” (Lipset 87) that aimed to benefit the populace in contrast to the grave errs of the Somoza regime. By illustrating the benefits of change to the mass of nonbelievers in the populace through consistent action, support for FSLN spread and manufactured an infectious yearning for democracy. During the transitional period and first FSLN presidency, Nicaraguans witnessed the potential impact that the voice of a population can confer on the course of their country. Since 1984, Nicaraguans have been able to go to the polls and chose leaders that they believe will best usher Nicaragua into an era of greater social and economic development, further ensconcing Nicaragua’s status as a viable home for democracy.

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